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ABSTRACT

Performance level assessment (PLA) is a type of supplementary evidence system for competency-based assessment that is being pilot tested at five technical and further education (TAFE) institutes throughout Queensland, Australia. The PLA system uses the following three levels of performance: competency achieved; competency achieved with credit; and competency achieved with distinction. To earn ratings of competency achieved with credit and competency achieved with credit, students must meet six and seven specific criteria, respectively. During the pilot project, North Point Institute of TAFE (NPIT) and Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE (CSIT) formed a research partnership to collectively improve their approach to implementation of PLA. Hospitality teachers in each institute met and developed objective criteria against a series of performance criteria. Additional meetings were held to translate the criteria to other assessment areas, design a template stating the agreed criteria, and discuss the following issues: (1) the fact that the objective criteria were open to subjective interpretation; (2) the use of performance indicators; and (3) the adequacy of the previously agreed assessment criteria. Through their partnership arrangement, teachers from NPIT and CSIT were able to conduct ongoing research and review aimed at improving the quality of Queensland's new PLA system. (MN)

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ED 456 309

Performance Level Assessment: developing quality and consistency through research partnerships

Kay Sanderson and Ron Pearce

Performance Level Assessment (PLA) is a type of supplementary evidence system for competency-based assessment being trialled by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Queensland. It was initiated in 1999 based on trials of a supplementary evidence system undertaken by the Architectural Technology Department of South Bank Institute of TAFE (SBIT) in 1999.

The Morningside campus of SBIT obtained approval from the Institute Director and gained support from employers and their Industry Association to trial this system. The main reason for the trial was to find a way that students wishing to articulate to university would not be disadvantaged. The outcomes of the trial were positive.

After investigating the outcomes from the trial, in January 2000 the Board of TAFE Queensland, through the Institute Reference Group (IRG) for Product, commissioned a project on PLA. The term PLA was chosen to avoid any confusion with grading systems based on the provision that units of competency cannot be graded. It was anticipated it would reduce the number of complaints received by TAFE Queensland from students, parents, employers and industry groups by issuing a supplementary evidence report to students based on their performance levels. The IRG (Product) set up a working party to provide guidance and support to the project and commissioned the Centre for Advancement of Innovative Learning (CAIL), Wide Bay Institute of TAFE, to manage the project. Endorsement for the project has not been sought from the State Training Authority as yet, as it is currently a TAFE response to client needs. Also, it is recognised that the PLA system is likely to be an interim arrangement for TAFE Queensland and is likely to provide an informed position to state, other states, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and national inquiries concerning supplementary evidence systems.

How does PLA work?

The PLA system uses three levels of performance: competency achieved, competency achieved with credit, and competency achieved with distinction. Initially students are assessed as competent or not yet competent based on assessment against a unit of competency. A student must be assessed as competent before being considered for a PLA of credit or distinction. To be assessed as competent with credit, a student must:

- demonstrate advanced reliability and responsibility;
- provide evidence of being able to access additional, relevant information and apply appropriately;
- present work with originality and/or creativity;
- demonstrate positive approaches to learning
- demonstrate the ability to work and learn independently and/or within a team; and

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2

- provide evidence of planning and resource allocation to ensure completion of tasks.

To be assessed as competent with distinction, a student must:

- demonstrate exceptional reliability and responsibility;
- provide significant evidence of being able to acquire, validate and apply relevant additional resources and sources of information and use them effectively and efficiently;
- demonstrate significant work output, quality, originality and creativity;
- demonstrate positive approaches to learning with a high degree of motivation;
- display a significant level of independence;
- provide evidence of monitoring and evaluation of work, including the ability to identify opportunities for improvement; and
- demonstrate mastery in application of tasks, ensuring flexibility, efficiency and effectiveness.

In some cases it may not be possible to assess a student against all the criteria for each level of credit or distinction. Teachers are required to select those most relevant to the unit of competency or cluster of units of competency that they are assessing. Performance indicators were used in the trials and are an option to assist teachers in establishing an overall credit or distinction level of performance for each student. The process allows for teachers to give feedback to students on their progression and is intended to provide motivation towards achievement of an overall performance level. Performance indicators range from one to five, each level indicating the following:

1. Minimal evidence of relevant criteria demonstrated
2. Some evidence of relevant criteria demonstrated
3. All relevant criteria demonstrated to achieve competency
4. Advanced level of performance demonstrated
5. Exceptional level of performance demonstrated.

Scope of the project

It is intended that the scope of the project will be such that it will impact upon all TAFE Queensland Institutes and potentially the majority of instructional/assessment staff and students. However, the scope of the pilot, at present, is limited to six qualifications across nine TAFE Queensland Institutes. Qualifications were selected to cover both large and small student populations, and institutes were selected to cover both metropolitan and country TAFE learners. Endorsement by the IRG (Product) for the inclusion of these participants in the pilot was to inform the development of the PLA system and formulate policy guidelines prior to more widespread implementation*.

Prior to commencement of the pilot, a number of professional development activities were conducted for instruction/assessment of pilot participants. These activities included an information dissemination teleconference and a one-day workshop for each industry area involved in the pilot. The workshops supplied participants with

the necessary information to understand PLA and to assist them in developing processes to implement the system with their students.

North Point and Cooloola Sunshine Institutes of TAFE research partnership

North Point Institute of TAFE (NPIT) is located in the northern growth corridor of Brisbane. NPIT is one of five Institutes in Queensland piloting PLA in their Diploma of Hospitality Management since mid-2000. Students in this Diploma include full and part-time students, including teenagers and mature aged students. Initially, the hospitality teaching team at NPIT met to discuss their approach to the implementation of PLA. A major issue identified was that of consistency in interpretation of performance criteria between teachers within the Institute and across other Institutes. North Point hospitality teachers approached Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE (CSIT) hospitality teachers concerning the issues of consistency in assessing using PLA. It was decided that teachers from similar delivery/assessment areas should meet. A meeting was arranged between the food and beverage teachers of each Institute.

At the meeting between NPIT and CSIT food and beverage teachers, objective criteria were developed against each performance criteria as shown in Figure 1. For instance, the teachers felt that if they were to assess reliability and responsibility, the criteria they would evaluate would be attendance, handing in assignments and punctuality. On completion of these criteria it was felt that although they had been designed by food and beverage teachers, they were generic enough to translate into other assessment areas. Opinions of teachers in other areas confirmed this belief. Consequently, a template was designed stating the agreed criteria. Both institutes trialled this system throughout semester II, 2000.

In January 2001, another meeting was held between teachers of NPIT and CSIT. This meeting was attended by teachers from all assessment areas of the Diploma of Hospitality Management from both institutes. At this meeting, teachers discussed the application throughout semester II, 2000 of the template which had been designed in the initial meeting. Three major issues emerged:

1. the objective criteria developed were open to subjective interpretation
2. the use of performance indicators
3. the adequacy of the previously agreed objective criteria for assessment.

The group felt that the objective criteria, which had been developed, were still open to subjective interpretation, thus jeopardising consistency. To overcome this, the group felt that a further column ought to be created on the template to clarify the objective criteria. For example, if a teacher uses the criteria attendance, what must a student achieve in relation to attendance to be awarded a credit or a distinction? Through further discussion, it emerged that this criteria may alter depending upon the unit of competency being assessed. Consequently, it was decided that the criteria to be included in the additional column should be specified by individual teachers, for their particular assessment area. However, where more than one teacher assesses a unit of competency or cluster, these teachers should agree on the criteria.

Figure 1: Levels of performance

Student name			
Qualification	Group/class		
Unit code	Unit title		
Performance description	Criteria	PF/ Ind	Comments
1 Demonstrate:			
Credit ... advanced reliability and responsibility	Attendance	3	
	Handing in assignments	4	
Distinction ... exceptional reliability and responsibility	Punctuality	5	
2 Be able to:			
Credit ... access additional relevant information	Assignment standard	3	
	Research skills	4	
Distinction ... acquire and apply additional information and use effectively and efficiently	Liaison with relevant persons in the workplace	5	
3. Present:			
Credit ...work with originality and creativity	Assignment presentation	3	
	Practical application	4	
Distinction ... significant quality work output with creativity and originality	Selling, greeting, etc	5	
4. Demonstrate:			
Credit ... positive approaches to learning	Class participation		
	Attitude and aptitude		
Distinction ... positive approaches to learning with high degree of motivation	Motivation		
5. Be able to:			
Credit ... work independently and / or within a team	Teamwork	3	
	Self-management	4	
Distinction ... display a significant level of independence	Using initiative	5	

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6. Provide evidence of:

Credit ... planning and resource allocation to ensure completion of tasks	Personal organisation	3
	Time planning	4
Distinction: ... monitoring and evaluating work and identifying opportunities for improvement	Resource utilisation	5

7. Demonstrate:

Distinction ... mastery of tasks ensuring flexibility efficiency and effectiveness	Exhibits a level of 5 in all aims 1–6 above with consistency throughout the unit	Y or N

Source: NPIT and CSIT meeting 1.

1. The use of performance indicators

Most teachers agreed that it is confusing using numerical performance indicators for formative assessment and then finally awarding a level of performance achieved as a credit or a distinction. Consequently, consensus was reached to make the formative performance indicators J for a competency, C for a credit and D for a distinction - the same as the final levels of performance awarded. However, at this stage, it was stressed that these performance indicators are precisely this. They are awarded to give the student an indication of the level at which they are performing, in their various assessment items, towards a competency or performance level.

2. The adequacy of the previously agreed objective performance criteria for assessment

The teachers reviewed the individual objective performance criteria developed by the food and beverage teachers for each level of performance descriptor and made minor changes as shown in Figure 2. For example, under the criteria '... access additional relevant information/ ... acquire and apply additional information and use effectively and efficiently', the teachers added a performance criteria of 'discussion/contribution'.

Finally, a new template was developed to reflect the changes referred to above. This template, shown in Figure 2, will be trailed at both NPIT and CSIT throughout semester I, 2001.

Figure 2: Levels of performance

Student Name				
Qualification	Group/class			
Unit code	Unit title			
Performance description	Suggested criteria	Teacher criteria	Pf/ Ind	Comments
1 Demonstrate				
Credit ... advanced reliability and responsibility	Attendance		J	
Distinction ... exceptional reliability and responsibility	Handing in assignments		C	
	Punctuality		D	
2 Be able to:				
Credit ... access additional relevant information	Assignment standard		J	
Distinction ... acquire and apply additional information and use effectively and efficiently	Research skills		C	
	Liaison with relevant persons in the workplace		D	
	Discussion/ contribution			
3. Present:				
Credit ...work with originality and creativity	Assignment presentation and content		J	
Distinction ... significant quality work output with creativity and originality	Practical application		C	
	Communication skills		D	
4. Demonstrate:				
Credit ... positive approaches to learning	Class participation		J	
Distinction ... positive approaches to learning with high degree of motivation	Attitude and aptitude		C	
	Motivation		D	

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5. Be able to:		
Credit ... work independently and / or within a team	Teamwork	J
	Self-management	C
Distinction ... display a significant level of independence		D
	Using initiative	
6. Provide evidence of:		
Credit ... planning and resource allocation to ensure completion of tasks	Personal organisation	**J**
	Time planning	**C**
Distinction: ... monitoring and evaluation of work and identify opportunities for improvement	Resource utilisation	**D**
	Analysis skills	
	Self-reflection / Initial reflection	
	Identification of improvement opportunities	
7. Demonstrate:		
Distinction ... mastery of tasks ensuring flexibility efficiency and effectiveness	Exhibits a level of 5 in all relevant aims in 1 – 6 above with consistency throughout the unit	Y or N

Source: NPIT and CSIT meeting 2.

Conclusions

This paper describes how NPIT and CSIT are using a partnership arrangement to conduct ongoing research and review aimed at improving the quality of the new PLA system being piloted in Queensland. It explains how teachers, as practitioners, are using action research to develop a consistent, generic, quality approach to PLA, which in turn may be translated for use with other Training Packages.

To date, as a result of this ongoing action research, consistency has been developed on two levels:

1. Across institutes
2. Within institutes.

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1. Across institutes

Across institutes, consistency has been developed by:

1. using agreed performance criteria
2. using agreed performance indicators.

2. Within institutes

Within institutes, consistency has been developed by:

1. using agreed performance criteria
2. using agreed performance indicators
3. using agreed individual unit of competency cluster criteria.

Perhaps the next stage will be to develop a closer alignment of the institutes regarding clustering arrangements for assessment purposes. This, in turn, would develop the opportunity to create agreed criteria at the individual unit of competency/cluster levels across institutes. If this can be achieved, it could form the basis of a consistency model which could be replicated across other institutes, other qualifications and other disciplines.

Note

*In December 2000 a full report on the effectiveness of the PLA system was completed and presented to the working party for consideration (Sanderson 2000). Based on this report, the Board of TAFE Queensland endorsed the continuation of the pilot for the year 2001 pending consideration of this report, including the recommendations by the working party.

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